

# Mongolia's Presidential Election

June 21, 2021

Mongolia's June 9 presidential election delivered a decisive victory for Ukhnaagiin Khurelsukh, the country's former Prime Minister (October 2017–January 2021) and current chairman of the ruling Mongolian People's Party (MPP). Khurelsukh received a record 68% of the vote. The Right Person Electorate Coalition's Dangaasurengiin Enkhbat came in second, with 20%, while Sodnomzunduin Erdene, the candidate from incumbent President Khaltmaagiin Battulga's Democratic Party (DP), received 6%. Voter turnout, at just under 60%, exceeded the required 50% threshold but was lower than in previous elections. According to Mongolia's electoral laws, presidential candidates can only be nominated by a party with parliamentary representation, but the president-elect must suspend party membership before assuming office. Nevertheless, Khurelsukh's victory is generally seen as cementing MPP control over the government, as the party holds a commanding majority in parliament. He is set to take office in July.

## Political Background

Following a peaceful revolution in 1990, Mongolia embarked on a successful democratic transition that set it apart from other formerly communist countries in the region. Congress has expressed strong support for Mongolian democracy and the U.S.-Mongolia strategic partnership. Elections in Mongolia are generally considered free and fair, and Mongolia is the only formerly communist country in Asia classified as “Free” by the U.S. nongovernmental organization Freedom House. The U.S. State Department describes Mongolia's achievements in terms of democratization and market reforms as “impressive,” but notes that institutional weakness and widespread corruption are enduring challenges. Mongolia has passed the Millennium Challenge Corporation's scorecard on control of corruption and democratic rights every year since 2018.

Although Mongolia has a multiparty system, political power since the country's democratization has generally alternated between two major parties, the MPP and the DP, which have established a track record of peaceful transitions of power. In 2016, the MPP won 65 of 76 seats in parliament, while the then-ruling DP won 9 seats. In the 2017 presidential election, Mongolians elected DP candidate Battulga following an unprecedented run-off, a result seen by some observers as reflecting voters' desire to counterbalance the MPP's power, among other factors. The MPP maintained its commanding majority in the most recent parliamentary elections, conducted in June 2020, winning 62 seats. The DP increased its

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share of seats to 11. This was the first time since Mongolia's transition to democracy that the same party maintained a parliamentary majority in two consecutive elections.

Constitutional [reforms](#) passed by the MPP-dominated parliament in 2019 reduced the scope of presidential powers and limited the president to one six-year term (previously, presidents were eligible to serve two four-year terms). Critics [accused](#) the MPP of attempting to manipulate 2021 presidential election by preventing the DP incumbent, President Battulga, from running for reelection. Although Battulga challenged his exclusion from the race, Mongolia's Constitutional Court upheld the term limit in April 2021, confirming that he would not be able to run for reelection. In response, Battulga issued a [decree](#) instructing the Supreme Court, which is responsible for registering political parties, to disband the MPP, accusing the party of manipulating the Constitutional Court and militarizing the state; the Supreme Court did not undertake any [actions](#) in this regard. Amid [infighting](#) within the DP and a dispute over the party's leadership, two factions within the party attempted to register two different candidates with the General Election Commission, which ultimately confirmed Erdene as the DP candidate, leading five DP parliamentary deputies to undertake a week-long [hunger strike](#) in protest. Some analysts have expressed [concern](#) that this increased polarization, political infighting, and instability is weakening the country's party system and potentially its democracy.

## Election Campaign and Administration

Mongolia managed to [contain](#) the number of Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) cases for most of 2020, but the election coincided with a dramatic [spike](#). The campaign, which officially launched on May 24, 2021, was constricted by pandemic-related restrictions. The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) [described](#) the campaign as “low-key” and concluded that the election was “administered efficiently and transparently.” Although Mongolia's media landscape is diverse and freedom of the press is generally respected, some [observers](#) note a lack of analytical media coverage of the political process. In the [assessment](#) of the OSCE, during the presidential campaign “the media informed voters about technical aspects of the election, but offered only limited independent information on the candidates beyond paid content provided by contestants,” impacting voters' ability to make informed choices. A televised debate among the three candidates had been scheduled for June 8, but the event was cancelled when Enkhbat was hospitalized after testing positive for COVID-19.

## Outlook

This was the first presidential election in which the Right Person Electorate Coalition, which entered parliament in 2020, fielded a candidate. Analysts posit that Enkhbat's strong showing may signal the end of the MPP-DP “[duopoly](#)” that has long dominated Mongolian politics. The number of votes cast for DP candidate Erdene was almost equaled by the number of blank ballots, which are valid under Mongolia's electoral laws and are seen as a form of protest vote. Some, [including Erdene](#), warn that Mongolia risks becoming a [one-party state](#) under the MPP. Others argue that Mongolians' tendency to elect the opposition party candidate to the presidency has led to political [deadlock](#) in the country, given that the prime minister holds most executive powers.

In Mongolia's semi-presidential system, the president's powers are limited, but he does exercise influence over foreign policy, the judiciary, and the military. Mongolia has long sought to maintain good relations with the two countries it borders, Russia and China, while also pursuing a “third neighbor” policy that emphasizes developing relationships outside of its immediate neighborhood, including with the United States. Khurelsukh's foreign policy [platform](#) upholds this approach. Domestically, Mongolia's government faces continued challenges stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic, which has caused significant [strain](#) on Mongolia's resource-based economy. The World Bank calculates that the country's

GDP **contracted** by 5.3% in 2020, down from 5.2% growth in 2019. Prior to his presidential run, Khurelsukh **resigned** as Prime Minister in January, amid protests over his government's handling of the pandemic.

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